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SUBJECT: DCM, MPS DISCUSS VIOLENCE IN LAM DONG AND QUANG BINH

¶1. (SBU) On July 22, the DCM met with the Deputy Director General of the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) General Security Department, Major General To Lam to discuss a range of operational issues and to reiterate U.S. concerns over violence affecting religious devotees in two locations: the Bat Nha Pagoda in Lam Dong Province and the Tam Toa Catholic church ruins in Quang Binh. As in her July 21 meeting with the Committee for Religious Affairs (septel), the DCM drew a sharp contrast between the situation in Lam Dong, where local police stood by as one party to the dispute brutally attacked monks and nuns occupying the pagoda, and that in Quang Binh, where it was the police who had reportedly beaten demonstrators calling for a restoration of the church. The DCM emphasized that the United States takes no position on either set of claims, both of which involve complicated property disputes, but was concerned with the attacks that had taken place.

¶2. (SBU) General Lam insisted that the MPS had urged both sides of the pagoda dispute in Bat Nha to refrain from violence and deserved credit for restoring order. He likened the conflict between followers of the Lang Mai ("Plum Village") Order and those affiliated with the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS) to the type of raucous behavior and fighting that sometimes occurs when a woman from one village is courted by a suitor from another. The MPS, he said, only intervened in "serious criminal cases." Lam said that the Embassy "lacked information" and accused "foreign elements" of skewing the story to attract attention and support. Feigning exasperation, Lam asked rhetorically whether the Embassy would protest the GVN's "interference" if the police had gotten involved earlier and more forcefully. Lam had considerably less to say about the property dispute concerning the Tam Toa Church, maintaining only that local authorities had acted appropriately. Dismissing the marriage analogy, the DCM again stressed that what concerns the U.S. government is not the details of the particular disputes, but the fact that people were beaten, in one case by the police, in the other with the police's implicit consent. She said while it was rare for a U.S. official to urge the MPS to take make arrests, this case, yes, the police should take action against the perpetrators of violence.

MICHALAK